

The Clipper Visits... Pam Bernard

By CHRIS PECK



Pam Bernard

Pam Bernard says her poems about the sexual abuse she suffered as a child are not her way of seeking vengeance but instead they help her get past the bad feelings.

"What is the new expression, 'Get over it?' Well, this is kind of my way of getting over it," she said referring to the hit, rock song by the Eagles who complain about people blaming their failures on their past.

PEOPLE - BERNARD

When her children were younger, Bernard worked in public relations at what was then called the Bröckton Art Museum. By 1984, she began writing poetry and the year before started painting.

"I spent all my time promoting other people's art and I realized I had to do my own art," she says.

In addition to needing a career that allowed more time to raise her adolescent children, Bernard said she felt there was a need to express herself and some of the things in her past. She says she has found that sexual abuse in families is much more pervasive than is known.

"I think most children are abused sexually and that it is usually by a family member and that it has been covered up," she said, staring ahead as if holding that grim thought. "And I don't know why it is."

An attractive woman with medium length dark brown hair, pulled back casually in a pony tail, she analyzes many of her words as they flow freely from her thoughts.

Statistics on child abuse are much lower than what is actually taking place, she believes. "It must be triple that. I mean I don't know. But it must be."

The Massachusetts Department of Social Services reports 20,664 cases of child abuse for 1994, its most recent statistics. Of those, 1,930, or only 7% were said to be sexually abused. The largest number of those, 470, were from the southeast region of Massachusetts.

The state further breaks down those statistics to show that in 1,396 cases, the child could identify the abuser and that 91% of the time, only one person was to blame.

Sixty-two percent of the children were abused by family members and 26% by their fathers.

At a recent poetry workshop Bernard attended, the topic of sexual abuse was discussed and a show of hands revealed 8 of the 9 people attending had been sexually abused children.

"Not one of these people is a statistic, they hadn't ever brought it up to the police or anyone," leading her to speculate that the actual number is much larger than statistics indicate.

Bernard hopes her poems, which she says she writes in order to find some understanding of why these things occur, will help other victims in their same search for answers.

Certainly her work has received some recognition in being selected for the National Endowment of the Arts award. Her grant was among the \$2.1 million awarded Massachusetts artists.

and has led her to success. She recently was awarded a \$15,000 creative writing fellowship by the National Endowment of the Arts. and, her first book of poetry, *My Own Hundred Doors*, will be published in September.

It took her 10 years to write the book, 9 in the writing and one year to find a publisher. Publishing her poems has cost her a relationship with her family, brothers and sisters who were not comfortable with airing the family secret.

Her now deceased older brother, whom she described as a "monster," a pedophile, was the molester in the family of 9 children.

Her parents, also dead, "probably did the best that they could," she says. Her work is not about blaming.

Bernard is the married mother of 2 adult children, who makes her home between Duxbury and Boston. She speaks warmly of her supportive, artist husband, Harry, and her son, Galen, 27, and daughter, Shea, 24, describing them as happy adults.

"Drop dead surprised. I remember thinking to myself, 'What in the heck is she calling me about?'"

Bernard had been watching for a published list of grant recipients and thought she had missed it. It never occurred to her that she would win. And the win means a lot.

"The point is some of the best writers on the planet chose my work. I just literally can't tell you what it feels like. It is indescribable."

Her book contains poems of interwoven themes, she says. One is early Renaissance art, which she uses to express her own life.

In her discussion of Gentile Da Fabriano's painting, *Flight Into Egypt*, she says the artist is painting Egypt as a medieval European town because that is what he was familiar with, instead of Egyptian architecture.

"He has to use his own life to do it, to create Egypt. How we use our past and how it is filtered through the present" Bernard explained is what she tries to show through the poems.

Another subject is architecture. "I use architectural imagery to express the motion of structure," she said. "Almost always the discussion has to do with families. How it often doesn't hold up the individual the way it might."

"My own family structure was rotten on the inside. No one was taking care of the children," she added.

Bernard earned her degree in art history from Harvard 6 years ago and then her masters of fine arts.

The grant will be used to research several projects through traveling to Europe which she plans to do next spring. One project is about Hildegard Von Bingen, a 12th century mystic nun and composer who became famous in her own time for her powers of vision. Another is Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor who was also a philosopher and writer.

Bernard and her husband also run a small design and consulting business, Team Creative, in Boston, that keeps her fairly busy. And, she has started a 2nd book, which she says "is coming much more quickly."

She plans to start a poetry workshop in her Duxbury home, a place for people to discuss their work that is "well on its way to being something; it's down on paper," she says.

"You ask the group to give you feedback. Does it make sense? Is the voice strong? Sometimes people can be moved by an aspect of the poem you didn't even know was there," she adds.

